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ABSTRACT

In an effort to learn more about the teaching of reading and interpretation of poetry, a structured experiment was devised whereby college English majors used a combination of reading, writing and discussion to study James Wright's poem "A Blessing." The primary aim was to involve the students emotionally in a poem. Students were encouraged to give immediate, uninhibited responses and to reconstruct their own versions of reality as triggered by the poetic text. Before reading the poem, students wrote accounts of personal experiences in order to sensitize them to the mood of the text. Students next read the poem quickly, wrote their general impressions of it, and discussed what they had written with small groups of peers. The poem was then re-read more systematically, and both visual and linguistic symbols were used to interpret it. This was followed by a second discussion in small groups, a more definitive written account describing and evaluating the poem, and finally a discussion of the poem by the class as a whole. The experiment revealed the importance of the movement from individual study to large group discussion and the power of physical engagement with a poem--using visual techniques as well as linguistic ones--as interpretive tools. (Eight references are attached.) (MHC)

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Reading and Writing about Poetry and the Reconstruction of Reality:

How College English Majors Read a Poem

Robert W. Blake

In order to teach students how to read and interpret poetry, I need to know what readers, in this case, college English majors, both graduate and undergraduate students, do as they meet a new poem. We have a long tradition in the schools of emphasizing the results of critical analysis, the polished critical essay--the product of interpretation--but it's surprising how little attention has been paid to the process of interpreting literature, what moves readers make as they progress through a literary text. Eugene Kintgen reported what the experts in literary interpretation--professors of English and their doctoral students--did as they interpreted a dense, ambiguous poem, "Winter Piece" by William Gibson. Anna Lunn and I recounted what five ninth graders did as they worked through a poem of moderate difficulty, "Every Good Boy Does Fine" by David Waggoner. In both instances, Kintgen and Mrs. Lunn and I had readers say everything they did into a tape recorder as they read and interpreted a poem they had never seen before. For several reasons, I wished to use a poem with the college students unlike the one we had used with the ninth graders, and I decided to set tasks for them quite different from that of talking into a tape recorder as they read, enlightening as that had proved to be.

First, to the choice of the poem, "A Blessing" by James Wright. A particularly perceptive graduate student in my class in "Teaching Literature" had pointed out that "Every Good Boy Does Fine" was a poem which lent itself to close textual analysis, that approach associated with the "New Critics," a "puzzle poem," if you will, a "recognition" poem, one in which after the reader has worked out the mystery of the interlocking elements of metaphor,

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rhythm, and rhyme, she "recognizes" the appropriateness and applicability to her life of what the poet has presented. In a self-fulfilling prophecy, perhaps, the ninth grade students used moves which they believed necessary for interpreting this type of poem. The poem I picked for the college English majors to interpret, "A Blessing" by James Wright, was a markedly dissimilar kind of poem. "A Blessing" is a poem of "revelation," one which would require close textual analysis but which I believed would also encourage many levels of subconscious associations, leading possibly from the associations to a new and profound emotional awareness, a "revelation" of some aspect of life which had not been disclosed to them before. From a poem about which I felt assured with my interpretation, I moved uneasily to a poem about whose interpretation I was frankly not at all confident. Perhaps my students would help me with its significance.

Once I had chosen the poem to be read and interpreted (my choice already implied a value judgment, I now recognize), there were other considerations, such as what tasks to give the students to guide them in their readings. Primarily, I wanted the students to read a poem, write about it, discuss their initial, spontaneous responses with the teacher and with other students, re-read the text with an eye toward substantiating their interpretations with specific references to the text, and finally read and discuss their written responses with a whole class, in this way possibly moving toward a group interpretation. The general plan was the result, I now know, of having taught interpretation of literature for a considerable length time and of extensive reading, especially of the works of a few individuals.

First, I had been influenced by the writing of David Bleich, especially by his Readings and Feelings and by the later Subjective Criticism. From his

Readings and Feelings, I had used in my graduate class. "Teaching Literature," his general "response heuristic," by which students read literary texts, especially short fiction and poetry, write responses to the texts, read out loud and discuss their responses in small groups, and then eventually, by whole class discussions of the pieces, move toward what Bleich calls a "communal response." Such reader tasks within the "response heuristic" proved to make classes spirited, often moving, and invariably exciting. By having students read rich and ambiguous stories such as Kipling's "The Man Who Would Be King," Jackson's "The Lottery," Hemingway's "The Killers," and O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find" and then by having them write and read to other students their responses and by having them read such responses in small groups and in the class as a whole, the students gradually began to feel free to write personally revealing responses--many effective essays in their own right--and to insist upon exhausting all aspects of complex literary texts--like O'Connor's "A Good Man Is Hard to Find"--until as a group they were satisfied with their communal interpretation. What happened, I found, was that the individuals became increasingly more honest and straightforward in their writing, more trusting of each other's comments and emotionally open in their discussions, and increasingly cohesive as a group, presenting idiosyncratic interpretations but showing a willingness to accept variations by others as they interpreted the texts. Since the "response heuristic" worked well with short fiction, I was encouraged to try it with poetry as well. Why, though, such an approach produced such striking results, I was not at all sure.

Later, as I read Anthony Petrosky's article, "From Story to Essay: Reading and Writing," I found an explanation and substantiation for why the

Bleich heuristic proved so successful. For Petrosky, writing about a text and discussing one's written response with others are the best ways for understanding a text. "We need," wrote Petrosky, "therefore, to share, read, and comment on each other's written responses if we are to understand ourselves as readers and writers and, equally important, if we are to understand the myriad aspects of texts." (20) Writing about reading, according to Petrosky is a powerful tool for thinking, understanding, and becoming self aware and is widely used for philosophical, psychoanalytic, and psychological inquiry. As individuals read a text, write responses to it, and share the responses with others, they are able to put into words many times shapeless ideas and feelings about themselves, the texts, and the world in which they find themselves. For Petrosky, the entire process of reading, writing, and discussing is "one of the most meaningful ways to integrate reading and writing in composition, reading, and literature classes." (35)

As I first read the Petrosky paper, I thought back to the earlier report by the National Assessment of Reading and Literature, Reading, Thinking, and Writing--on which Petrosky worked--and found a practical four-step model for implementing the reading/writing/discussing approach with interpreting literary texts. The authors of the assessment found that although 13- and 17-year old students could read a wide range of material, they had evidently developed "few skills for examining the nature of the ideas they take away from their reading" and "generally did not return to the passage to explain the interpretations they made." (2) Furthermore, the responses by the students showed little evidence that they had learned problem-solving strategies or critical thinking skills for use in reading and interpreting literary texts. The end result was "an emphasis on shallow and superficial

opinions at the expense of reasoned and disciplined thought." (4) In order to interpret the results of the survey, the authors developed a "four-step model of the process through which comprehension would evolve." (2) This is the model:

1. Initial comprehension, leading to
2. Preliminary interpretations, followed by
3. A reexamination of the text in light of these interpretations, leading to
4. Extended and documented interpretation. (2)

Although the model was designed for "interpreting the results" of the survey, it seems a useful approach for teaching students how to read and interpret literary texts by reading, writing, thinking, discussing, and interpreting.

Finally, among the works which directly influenced my approach I can identify Charles Moran's essay, "Teaching Writing/Teaching Literature." Moran gave students in a college class on the novel writing assignments dealing with some aspect of a particular writer's performance, an essential "component" which the author used often, for instance, a short dramatic scene, a description of a place, or an interior monologue. The students were asked to become writers like those they were studying. What struck me about Moran's account was the fact that the students were asked to write in the distinctive mode of a literary text before they read the novel by the author. For Moran, as the students themselves wrote literary texts before they read pieces of fiction, they became more effective readers of literature as well as better writers of exposition, their writing. says Moran, becoming

more daring, more distinctively personal, more confident, and even more aggressive.

Why, I wondered, would this be so and thought back to my general knowledge of "schema" theory of reading, particularly as Petrosky summarizes it in the previously cited article. Readers discover meaning in a text in terms of the personal schemata they bring to a text, a schema being an individual's framework for viewing the world, based upon her personal background, experience, knowledge, and values that help her shape how she knows, believes, and feels. If such a notion is accurate, then why not have readers write in the mode of a story or of a poem before they encounter a text? Such a pre-writing/pre-reading activity might sensitize the reader to the mood of the text or bring to the surface unconscious knowledge about an experience, image, or mood which would help the reader discover and reconstruct personal meaning from a new literary text. Moran's work with students' writing before they read a novel would seem to substantiate the usefulness of such an approach. If the method worked for reading fiction, I asked myself, why would it not work for reading of poetry?

Based upon this general orientation, I devised the following procedure for students to read a poem. First, I wanted them to write out in a few sentences an account of an emotional time much like the situation revealed in the poem before they actually read the poem. Then I wanted them to read the poem, write out a general impression of what the poem was "essentially" about and discuss in groups of from four to five individuals their initial reactions. After this first discussion, I wanted them to re-read the poem, more carefully and more systematically and then discuss this second reading in their small groups. On the basis of their two readings and discussions, I

wanted them to return to the poem once again, and, using evidence from the text, write out a two- or three-paragraph response, substantiating what it was "essentially" about and evaluating its worth. Finally, I wished to have all the students discuss within the whole class their interpretations to find out whether they would be able to arrive at general consensus about its meaning, a "communal" response.

1. Pre-reading/Pre-writing. I believe we've always known intuitively that individuals read according to what they bring to a text (that's only sensible and not very profound when you stop to think about it), but, as I have previously related, recent writers have accounted for this situation in several ways. Some cognitive psychologists call such a notion "schema" theory, an account of the personal experiences, ideas, values, and attitudes which color one's reading of a text, while other learning psychologists term this initial attitude as "set," a predisposition to learn. (Petrosky). Those literary critics who ally themselves with the movement loosely termed structuralism inform us that in order to understand a literary text we need to become aware of the generic, stylistic, and cultural codes which are implicit in the text and in which readers find themselves as they read the text. (Scholes). I can't really understand Shakespeare's Hamlet, for example, unless I am able to create schema of the revenge tradition during Shakespeare's time and of the behavior of ghosts in sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries. If, in fact, the reader's state of mind is so crucial before she enters the text, I asked myself, why not sensitize her--as Moran had done--to an aspect of the text, be it intellectual or emotional, by having her write spontaneously and freely before she considers the text?

Although I had the undergraduate and graduate English majors write something before they had a chance to read the poem in question, one needs to see the poem to understand why I devised such a pre-reading/pre-writing assignment. Here is the poem, "A Blessing" and the initial writing task.

Pre-reading Task for "A Blessing"

by James Wright

Think about a time when you had so much feeling for a parent, child, spouse, lover, or animal that you could barely contain yourself, that you thought you would literally burst. Possibly you were "manic," your voice rising and blood rushing to your face. Or you were so happy that you couldn't speak at all. Maybe you felt yourself changing into another creature, a tawny lion, a wild goose, a silvery fish, or a delicate deer. In a few sentences, write about such a time.

"A Blessing"

Just off the highway to Rochester, Minnesota,
Twilight bounds softly forth on the grass.
And the eyes of those two Indian ponies
Darken with kindness.
They have come gladly out of the willows
To welcome my friend and me.
We step over the barbed wire into the pasture
Where they have been grazing all day, alone.
They ripple tensely, they can hardly contain their happiness
That we have come.
They bow shyly as wet swans. They love each other.
There is no loneliness like theirs.
At home once more,
They begin munching the young tufts of spring in the darkness.
I would like to hold the slenderer one in my arms,
For she has walked over to me
and nuzzled my left hand.
She is black and white,
Her mane falls wild on her forehead,
And the light breeze moves me to caress her long ear
That is delicate as the skin over a girl's wrist.

Suddenly I realize
That if I stepped out of my body I would break
Into blossom.

James Wright

I had initially tried out this pre-reading activity with a group of experienced secondary school English teachers, who reported that what they wrote was too personal to read out loud to an entire group or even in small, fairly intimate groups. It is instructive to note that even though they would not share their reactions with each other, they were willing to let me read their pieces. (Why, I wonder as I'm aside, am I as the teacher a privileged confidant?)

In any event, I asked the English majors to write in response to the pre-reading task. I told them they would not be asked to read their responses out loud in small groups but that I would collect and study them later. Here are samples of the pre-reading responses, written, remember, in a very short amount of time without any attempt to re-think or revise their original responses. Joyce recounts her feelings for a lover; Brian, a love of his wife and newborn baby; and Charlene, an outburst of feeling for an elderly patient dying of cancer.

Pre-writing for "A Blessing"

Joyce

No one had ever touched my soul the way he had. We had sparred on so many occasions that when it came time to say goodbye, my tears surprised me. Him, too. But all the hostility melted between us--a false hostility we had constructed to shield us, each from our own overwhelming, enveloping feelings for each other. Feelings so deep, so powerful that our love would not only destroy us, but so many around us. He took me in his arms and kissed me, ever so passionately. It's a kiss I never will forget as long as I live. A

kiss with the promise of so much, and a kiss infused with death; of a love that could never come to fruition. Knowing that he felt as deeply for me, as I for him; that our parting was as painful for him as it was for me. I felt so different. I wanted to tell all my friends about his love, but I couldn't. I kept it in, I had to. I felt as if I glowed, though. I felt so pretty, yet so sad. It hurt to love so much.

Pre-writing for "A Blessing"

Brian

When my first daughter was born, I experienced a very high point in my relationship with my wife. We had been through some rough times--I had gotten laid-off just two weeks earlier. Gina was feeling, as I was, very anxious about our being able to support a child--not only financially but emotionally as well. Gina had a difficult delivery, and I really felt terrible; it seemed as though now, for the first time in our marriage, I couldn't console her or ease her pain. Then finally, after 13 hours of labor, she gave birth to a beautiful baby girl. For some reason, Gina thought I wanted a son. She kept saying, "I'm sorry; I'm sorry." All I could do was just squeeze her hand and admire my new child.

Pre-writing for "A Blessing"

Charlene

When I was working as a nurse's aide, a lady with cancer needed twenty-four hour care. It was my day to stay with her, and I always held her hand in hopes it would give her comfort. She began to cough and I reached up to clear the hair from her eyes. As I did so she opened her eyes and looked at me. This was the first time I had ever seen them--and at that moment a great feeling of love trembled through my body. I felt her hand tighten in mine

and I know that for a very short time I gave love and comfort to a dying person.

2. Initial Reading/Initial Writing. Now that the students had written about a time in their lives which would possibly sensitize them to the poem they would be reading and which would bring to their consciousness a memory analogous to the event in the poem, I wanted them to read the poem very quickly, for a "general impression," and to put into written language what they thought the poem was "essentially" about. The aim here was for them to reveal their immediate, intuitive sense of what the poem "meant" to them.

Task for the	Read the poem fairly quickly for your general
Readers:	impression of it. Write out in several sentences what
	the poem is "essentially" about.

After they had taken perhaps ten minutes to perform this task, I asked them to read out loud what they had written and to discuss their responses in small groups of from three to four students.

Task for the	Read your response in a group of from three to four
Readers:	students. Comment on the responses your fellow
	students read.

Here are the initial writing responses by Joyce and Charlene.

Initial Response to "A Blessing"

Joyce

The poet has experienced the incredible beauty of creation by observing and allowing his senses to be stimulated by this pair of ponies. The nature imagery fused with the detail of the ponies creates in the poet a

transcendental experience. If he would step out of his body, he too would blossom presumably as some kind of beautiful flower or as a wild, free creature in its natural environment.

Initial Response to "A Blessing"

Charlene

"A Blessing" by James Wright is about the love that can be found between an animal and a human. The narrator has so much love for the horses that the look and feel of them make him overflow with happiness. The last line seems to be the highlight of the poem. That sometimes one can feel so happy, excited, and cared for that if it were possible the human body could take on a different form--most likely one that is more beautiful than the human body (as shown here as a blossom).

3. Re-reading. Once the students had read the poem quickly for a "general impression," I asked them to re-read the poem, more carefully and more systematically now, using all the skills at their command for interpreting literary texts.

When I had originally asked the group of experienced secondary school English teachers to perform this same task, I provided them with suggested activities for re-reading. I directed them to re-read the poem, line-by-line, following systematic strategies, possibly thinking about the following elements: images, denotation, connotation, simile, metaphor, metonymy, synecdoche, and "connections"--such as recurring words and images, rhythm, and rhyme. The experienced teachers reported that the directions actually hampered rather than helped them with their interpretations. When I had first devised the directions for re-reading, I was half aware I had created them to show the readers rather smugly I knew what the standard techniques

were for interpreting a poem, but after the feedback from the teachers, I realized it was more important to have them intuitively and spontaneously interpret a poem than for them to follow external guidelines for reading, no matter how pertinent and exhaustive they may seem to be to the teacher.

This is the task I gave the students for re-reading and revising their interpretations, including an assessment of how good they believed the poem to be, based upon their several readings and discussions with their fellow students:

Task for the
Readers:

Now re-read the poem more carefully, more analytically, possibly line-by-line. Use any strategies you believe will help you arrive at a satisfying understanding. Mark the paper with the poem as you see fit. Underline, encircle, draw arrows, make diagrams, designs, or pictures; do whatever helps you understand the poem.

As the students read the poem and worked through it with words and symbols, I believed the activity would be just one more stage in the process of reading, writing, discussing, and interpreting. In the back of my mind, I suspected that since a poem is visual as well as linguistic, it would be natural for a reader to react to a poem not only with word associations and questions but also with underlinings, circles, arrows, and other such visual devices. As I studied what the readers did with their copies of the poem, though, I became aware that the process--of one's physically engaging directly with a poem on a page--was obviously a more powerful tool for interpreting a text than I had assumed. It was almost as if the readers, by

reacting with words and with other non-linguistic symbols, were revising the poem in order to recreate their own interpretations, to re-construct their versions of reality. This stage in the process of interpreting a poem was more potent than I had imagined.

Visual and Linguistic Techniques to Recreate a Poem

Visual Techniques. One needs to study the protocols of the students' marking of their poems to see how they used visual techniques to read a poem--re-create it, I'd rather say--but let me describe the non-linguistic symbols they used for "wrestling" with the meaning of "A Blessing."

As I examined the protocols, I was first struck by the numerous visual signs, but as I looked at them more closely, I realized they were actually few in kind and were primarily used to relate and connect words, phrases, and questions jotted down in the margins of the sheets on which the poem was printed. Several readers, in fact, did without visual devices, using words only as designators and connectors. In terms of the alphabetic principle, the visual symbols--other than letters--available to readers are actually very few compared with the potentially infinite number of combinations of letters for producing words available to us through the alphabet. (Havelock). It's only with words, derived from the arbitrary arrangement of letters by the alphabetic principle, that one is able to relate the complexity of a literary text, in this case, a poem such as "A Blessing."

The readers, therefore, no doubt, following my directions, used these non-alphabetic symbols to help them in reconstructing their versions of the poem. They underlined--a traditional academic activity during reading--and encircled words and phrases. They numbered sections and connected parts of

the poem with brackets. One reader enclosed words in a horizontal diamond. Some used arrows to point: single-shafted, double-shafted, and even the elegant arrows I associate with those used in diagrams made by engineers. I wondered what special significance there was to the arrows--there were so many of them--until I realized they were used to connect words and phrases to written comments jotted down in a single-spaced copy of the poem. (In the future, I'll let students react on double-spaced copies.) One reader was fond of the asterisk. Some readers connected elements with parentheses, brackets, and even with angled lines. A couple of readers drew maps and pictures, as I had suggested, showing the relationships in the poem among the elements of the highway, the barbed wire, and the pasture.

Linguistic Techniques.

If the visual symbols were relatively few in number and simple to identify and categorize, the complex use of words was another matter altogether.

Asking Questions and Talking to One's Self. I couldn't help but wonder whether the act of writing out questions to one's self and answering them on paper which I observed on the protocols was an example of what Moffett calls "liberating inner speech" (Moffett). For Moffett, one stops thinking--especially about old ideas--in order to let new thoughts come into the mind. We liberate "inner speech" by meditating or by writing, continues Moffett, so that we may surprise ourselves with novel ideas and re-combinations of old ideas. What happens is this: "To think of new things, and of old things in new ways, they [student writers] will need to start with something familiar and go somewhere with it they haven't been before." (307).

Perhaps, in a like way, readers of an unfamiliar, worthwhile poem, by talking to themselves, by asking themselves questions about the text, allow new ideas to enter their minds. By "liberating inner speech," they think unfamiliar thoughts, they create strikingly new structures, they reconstruct reality.

Here are some of the questions written out by the readers on their copies of the poems, with key phrases from the poem in quotations which triggered the questions. In almost all cases, except where they would have been unintelligible, the original, immediate phrasings have been retained.

Why the title: What about "we"? What happened to the "we"?

"black and white"--Is this necessary?

"light breeze"--Why does the breeze move him?

"into blossom"--does "blossom" have anything to do with "Tufts of spring"?

"ripple tensely"--how does tensely and happiness go together?

"wet swans"--wet from the night dew?

Interpreting. Try as I might, I could find few other categories besides those of asking questions and interpreting. I tried to fit comments into categories of "associating" or "rephrasing" or "paraphrasing," but the more I looked at the responses, the more I was convinced they represented interpretation, from explaining what single words meant to fully realized interpretations of the entire poem. Here are some examples of the interpretive responses, again with key phrases from the poem in quotes.

"A Blessing"--to bless--to sanctify--those who receive love are blessed

"break"--burst

"twilight bounds"--moon is coming up

"off the highway"--road as in a journey

"Rochester, Minnesota"--concrete, worldly juxtaposed with nature imagery
"willows"--forest--unconscious--irrational--womb
"barbed wire"--beauty of wire another paradox--barbed in--metaphor for
soul barbed in
"tufts of spring"--begins as a metaphor of complete communion with
nature--not grass but "tufts of spring"
"break into blossom"--explode to ecstasy--perfection
"ripple tensely"--almost visceral response
"munching"--prior to sharing "to partake" break bread together
"hold the slenderer one"--transfer of love to everything
"skin over a girl's wrist"--pure
--if the ponies eat the tufts of spring (flower has turned into and he
will become one with them)
--under extremes of emotions, one can feel like turning into other
existences, even though this happiness is aroused by gentle loving
animals
--he realizes that there is so much love and joy within him that the
feeling is almost too much--he could become something he isn't
--paradoxical language creates tone of, well, "loneliness" coupled with
nature imagery--beautiful--creates sense of singleness; aloneness
from other creatures, but communion with the sensual, nature, the
unconscious. Leads to the final realization that the soul--the
separate spirit--can--"blossom" and grow in nature. Possibly--to
live, one must have love. To know it and experience it is "A
Blessing."

4. Continued Discussion. After the students had re-read the poem more carefully, more analytically, I asked them to return to their small groups for a review of their original interpretations. My aim was to have them continue with finer, more detailed, perhaps with more mature and sophisticated interpretations of the poem.

Task for the	Discuss your re-reading in the same group of students.
Readers:	Again, what is the poem "essentially" about?

5. Re-writing (Extended Interpretation with Documentation). I now wanted to let students write more extended interpretations of perhaps two or three paragraphs, based upon their pre-reading/pre-writing samples, their initial written response, their in-depth re-reading of the poem, and their discussions of the poem and their reactions with their fellow students. Furthermore, I wanted them to assess the value of the poem, based upon their considerable reconstruction of the text.

I realized that they wouldn't have time to produce a polished, carefully revised critical essay, but I really didn't want them to be removed from the immediate situation of interpreting the poem and wished them to create a more detailed response than their initial, short responses, but one which was still fresh and immediate.

Task for the	On the basis of your two readings and discussion, now write out a one- or two-paragraph response to the text. What is the poem "essentially" about? Use evidence from the poem to justify your interpretation.
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How good is the poem? On what do you base your judgment?

Here are samples of the final, written interpretations, with assessments of the value of the poem, by Charlene, Brian, and Joyce.

Revision, with Evaluation, of "A Blessing"

Charlene

The poem, "A Blessing," is about an incident that brings a person to the height of love and happiness. The setting--twilight, spring, and a light breeze--, along with the beauty and friendship of the horses brings the narrator to a point of jubilation, one that goes unnoticed until almost the end of the poem where he states, "Suddenly I realize."

It seems he didn't quite know the feeling existed within his body, but when he did it was so intense that for a split moment, "if [he] stepped out of [his] body," he would burst open into a full blossom.

I consider this poem quite good because, though I haven't experienced it in quite the same way, it brings feeling to me that dulls my heart. Not a blunt dull one, but a sharp one. Where the feeling is aroused and the heart translates it to the mind and memory.

Revision, with Evaluation, of "A Blessing"

Brian

I think that this poem deals with love. The persona seems to have an impediment of some kind that prevents him from fulfilling his love. He feels he has to step out of his body in order to "break into blossom." This idea of love unfulfilled, or possibly love/hate is represented by contrasts such as "black & white," "loneliness" and "love," etc. The "slenderer one" seems

to associate with the earlier reference to "my friend," as well as the more obvious pony.

The concept of unfulfilled love is represented also where the poem reads "They have been grazing all alone."

I think this is a very good poem because it is capable of giving birth to many "interpretations." Thus the poem is very rich in meaning. And invites one to re-read and re-read, never believing that the piece has been exhausted.

Revision, with Evaluation, of "A Blessing"

Joyce

This poem is essentially about the poet's experience in a field and how it affects him. I see essentially 3 levels of division in the poem. The poet leaves the highway--or the world of man. He & his friend step over the barbed wire. The world of man is the first level. Then they are in the pasture with the ponies. That is the second realm. The poet takes in all the imagery which surrounds him and he feels that if he could step outside his body, he would blossom. That is the third realm, a transcendental experience caused by this communing with the ponies.

I think this is a good poem because I like the imagery. I feel the pony nuzzle his hand, I see the ponies as sleek wet swans. Their shyness and their love touch me. I can hear them bound softly on the grass. I can emphasize with the poet and the incredible joy he feels within. I can clearly picture this situation and since I am very much an outdoors person, I am deeply touched by all of this. What I wonder about is the "we" that was mentioned. The ponies welcome them--the poet and his friend. I as a reader, too, feel welcomed. The poem gave me a feeling of peace and recalled the

wonders of creation for me. This poet is sensitive to nature & realizes that the natural world is in fact a blessing.

6. General Discussion (Whole Group). For a final activity, I wanted to move all of the readers from working individually and discussing in small groups to a consideration of the poem in the total group, to find out whether or not we would approach a "communal response." By "communal" I don't mean a narrow, straight-jacketed, identical interpretation but rather an agreement about the general features of the poem--although I would expect individual, idiosyncratic responses--a consensus, if you will, about the overall meaning of the poem. These are the questions I addressed to the whole group.

Task for the Readers:	Has your response changed in any significant way from the initial reading? Explain. Does your small group generally agree on the interpretation of the poem? Does the whole class generally agree on the essential meaning of the poem?
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What do I make of this attempt to engage undergraduate and graduate English majors--fairly experienced and sophisticated readers--in interpreting an ambiguous but rich and worthwhile poem?

There is no doubt in my mind that what I asked the students to do was an intense and complicated procedure, but my primary aim was to have them become emotionally involved in a poem, not to have them just solve a linguistic puzzle. I wanted to provide a way for them to enter a poem, to see how they could consider various aspects of the poem, returning to the elements several times for increasingly richer responses, to reconstruct their own version of

reality triggered by the poetic text. The students were not expected to produce a polished critical essay on the poem, for that was not my ultimate purpose; rather I wanted them to give immediate, uninhibited responses, successively refined by small group discussions and first draft written responses, to a poetic text.

As far as an assessment of the effectiveness of the various stages in the process is concerned, I can only venture opinions based upon my observations, what the students wrote, and what they said at the end of the period.

It is difficult for me to make any one-to-one connections between the prewriting task for sensitizing students to the emotional tone of the poem and their interpretations, for the human mind is too rich and flexible to permit this, but some of the students, in comments like these, reported that the prewriting task did, to some extent, accomplish its purpose. One student said, "It started to move my thinking into a subjective mode." Another stated, "I had never thought of turning into something else--like a 'blossom.'" Possibly as evidence that they were deeply involved in creating the prereading task, several students said they were frustrated when I asked them to finish what they were writing and move on to the next task. This comment is representative of the ones made about this problem. "I was very jealous of my own world. I didn't want to be interrupted by you [the teacher] when I was in a feeling mode." The primary problem with this task, as I see it, lies in designing prereading tasks which reflect the poem to be read but which at the same time do not focus the students' attention on too restrictive a response.

There are several advantages to the students' reading their responses and revised responses to the poem in small groups. First, by having students read out loud their responses in groups of from four to five individuals, I made sure each student would enjoy the luxury of reading her response out loud and having it commented on by others. In addition, since the groups were small, individuals who might have remained silent in an entire group of twenty-five or thirty students were not as intimidated as they might have been by compulsive talkers and became less inhibited in their contributions to the discussion. Several students reported that the conversations helped them with their interpretations. These are representative comments:

"The whole group is drawing on each other."

"The discussion reinforced my interpretation."

"I began to see this [an interpretation] as people talked."

"My response was enriched as other people talked."

From my observation, the students in the small groups discussed their interpretations animatedly and often heatedly. It is probably pertinent to point out that this class took place late in the semester, after the students had had considerable experience working in small groups, observing guidelines for group behavior, such as describing, not evaluating; respecting each other's opinions and trying to see each other's point of view; and generally respecting what each had to say and learning to encourage each other to offer responses to a text without fear of criticism or sarcasm.

For the most part, at the end of the process, as they responded as members of the entire group, few reported they had changed their initial, immediate interpretation of the poem. There were, to be sure, many different opinions involving the meaning of specific words or phrases, but generally

speaking, they all agreed on the overall meaning of the poem. One student, however, did note that, after hearing other responses, she changed her original, harshly critical estimation of the poem to a more appreciative one. She wrote, "I changed my initial, smug interpretation."

Sophisticated readers of literary texts probably would profit from such a procedure only once or twice. Experienced teachers of English reported the guidelines for following the elements of a particular critical apparatus restricted their responses. On the other hand, very unsophisticated readers do need to learn the strategies for reading and responding to mature literary texts.

The importance of the students' marking up their copies of the poem continues to amaze me. Researchers in the writing of very young children report that preparatory to writing, children draw pictures and talk to themselves. I was surprised to find that mature men and women do the same thing, it seems to me, as a way of dealing with a poem. And very possibly, as they talked to themselves, they were, as Moffett suggests, liberating inner speech in order to accommodate fresh and novel responses to the poem.

The movement from the response of a solitary individual to the interaction among individuals within small groups to the discussion among members of the whole class was crucial. The tasks were teacher devised but student executed, and it seems evident that by this progression the power of the group as well as the potential of each individual was tapped.

Even though the approach may have been too involved and too structured, I remain convinced that the general activities of writing, reading, and responding and discussing these responses with others--of ultimately

reconstructing new texts--are useful for individuals to learn how to read and interpret ambiguous, sophisticated and worthwhile poems.

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